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Covert action and democracy

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Given the trail of American "covert action" disasters, from the Bay of Pigs in 1961 to last year's Nicaraguan mine-laying fiasco, you would have thought that no one as sophisticated as the French claim to be would have blundered down that dismal path. The French, of course, are not much given to learning anything from Americans—or at least not to acknowledging such—so they have gone out and made their own mess.

Though the experience was not worth the life of an innocent human being, the Rainbow Warrior affair at least gives us the opportunity to consider the covert action syndrome without, for once, being absorbed in our own embarrassment, frustration and humiliation.

We may not have many more opportunities to observe the matter with such detachment. The Reagan administration is working hard to expand the U.S. military's "special operations" capability and the military services, as is their wont, are falling over themselves to translate that into elaborate rival and duplicative force structures. Never mind that no one has figured out how such forces are to be used. They are already about 30,000 strong; eventually someone will find something for them to do.

One "someone" with some ideas along those lines is E. Howard Hunt, who, since his release from prison for his part in the Watergate "plumbers" operations, has become a novelist and a public advocate of doing to the Soviets as they do to us in the murky world of supposedly covert warfare.

Hunt is a living reminder of how covert operatives trained to work against real or supposed foreign enemies can be turned to domestic political purposes. He and several other Watergate figures incarcerated with him emerged from the covert action branch of the Central Intelligence Agency. Probably no group of governmental employees in U.S. history managed to do so much damage to national honor and prestige in so little time.

With the Bay of Pigs operation, doomed in concept and structure from the start, must be listed the undermining of the nearest thing Iran ever has had to a moderate government, in 1953; the implication

of the United States in the murder of Congo leader Patrice Lumumba; and the overthrow of Guatemala's legitimate, albeit leftist, government in 1954.

By the 1970s, the dabbling of the CIA covert action staff in drugs, prostitution and co-intrigues with the Mafia finally provoked a congressional inquiry, followed by a drastic reduction of the covert action staff during the Carter administration. The Reagan administration promptly rehired many of the covert operatives and, just as promptly, those operatives produced another national embarrassment in the Nicaraguan mining incident.

What all this should have told us long since is that there is no such thing as a half-war. Democracies are structured to operate in peace or in war, but they are incapable of dealing with something in between without corrupting that very structure and the institutions their military forces are supposed to protect.

Anyone who doubts this should consider the findings of New York Times reporters Jeff Gerth and Joel Brinkley, published on Sept. 25 and 26, that the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency and other government agencies routinely violate federal laws against illegal gun-running in pursuit of covert action objectives.

People who are contemptuous of U.S. and international law will require little prompting to extend that attitude to domestic politics.

The notion that there is an easy way to get around either open military action or a frank acknowledgment that we lack the power to control or influence events has led us into a long series of failures and humiliations.

The same sort of illusion misled the French into believing they could circumvent the military and political problems created by their nuclear testing program by sneaking a couple of frogmen into Auckland harbor.

At bottom, covert action reflects a distrust of the body politic. It is based on a belief that the public is either not capable of understanding the importance of what is at stake, or that if it knew the measures being taken it would disapprove. Both attitudes are antidemocratic.

Military covert action is an act of war. In the democratic context it can be conducted without jeopardy to democratic institutions themselves only when an acknowledged state of war exists. It is time, therefore, to close down our own military covert action staff in the CIA and to take a careful look at the burgeoning "special operations" forces in the Pentagon.

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